

Twin Telepathy

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The suggestion of a ‘special connection’ between twins is an old one, and incidents suggestive of telepathy are frequently reported in the popular press. Nevertheless, the topic remains neglected by the research community. There have been a number of promising starts, but as yet no sustained research programme into telepathy between twins.

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Early Reports

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, mentions in his *Journal* for 7 April 1781 a pair of twin sisters ‘between whom there is so strange a sympathy that if either of them is ill, or particularly affected at any time, the other is so likewise’. The women also had simultaneous identical dreams although they were living far apart, Wesley noted.¹

Another early reference is found in Catherine Crowe's *The Night-Side of Nature* (1848), where she writes of the 'admirable sympathy' that was 'generally manifested, more or less, between all persons twin-born', implying that this was already common knowledge. She mentions a woman who showed symptoms of drowning at the precise time that her twin was indeed drowning.²

Twin sympathy was the subject of a novel, *The Corsican Brothers* (1844), by Alexandre Dumas, whose leading character is one of a pair of conjoined twins separated at birth. This, he explains, 'means that however far apart we are now, we still have one and the same body, so that whatever impression, physical or mental, one of us perceives has its after-effect on the other'. The character senses the death of his brother in a duel in Paris, at a time when he himself is out riding in Corsica. Evidence later emerged to suggest that this fictional incident may have been based on fact.³

In 1863, a French doctor named Baume was able to investigate at first hand a very unusual and complicated case of what he called '*folie suicide*' between two twins that also included identical dreams. He found it sufficiently remarkable to publish a detailed account of it in a leading medical journal.⁴

This and similar cases of apparent synchronized insanity prompted the scientist Francis Galton to carry out a study of the thirty-five twins that he was able to contact. He found an 'extremely close resemblance' in eleven of them, and gave an example of what struck him as more than coincidence:

One of the most curious anecdotes that I have received concerning this similarity of ideas was that one twin, A, happened to be at a town in Scotland, bought a set of champagne glasses which caught his attention, as a surprise for his brother B; while, at the same time, B, being in England, bought a similar set of a precisely the same pattern as a surprise for A.

He added that 'other anecdotes of a like kind have reached me about these twins', but gives no details. Such cases are often dismissed as instances of 'concordance' rather than telepathy, yet while the former could account for the brothers' preference for identical glasses, it could hardly explain their presumably spontaneous wishes to surprise each other at the same time.⁵

Early SPR Research

When the Society for Psychical Research (</articles/society-psychical-research>) was founded in 1882, the word 'telepathy' being coined in the same year by Frederic Myers (</articles/frederic-wh-myers>), three of its members – Myers, Edmund Gurney (</articles/edmund-gurney>) and Frank Podmore (</articles/frank-podmore>) – carried out a large survey of spontaneous phenomena in the general public, and received a number of well witnessed accounts from twins which led them to comment that

On the supposition that a natural bond between two persons is a favorable condition for telepathic influence, there is one group of people among whom we might expect to find a disproportionate number of instances, namely twins.

This is what they did find, and they published five cases they had followed up, all of which involved the apparent awareness of the death or near-death of a distant twin, as in Dumas' novel. One twin described 'a sort of panic fear', another felt 'a strange sadness and depression', while a third saw a vision of his distant brother staring at him in a crowded Toronto theatre 'in an intent, weird and agonizing manner' on the evening he died – in China.⁶

It was several decades before researchers attempted to follow up these promising clues, or even to report new ones. In 1942, zoology professor (and twin) HH Newman of the University of Chicago published a book that included a chapter on 'super-twins' in which he cited several examples of apparent telepathy he had heard from his students. A particularly striking one involved two boys who had written identical examination papers, even making the same mistakes although they were in separate rooms. On another occasion, the boys again being separated because of earlier suspicions of collusion, one of them complained that he could not start writing because his brother was 'not ready'. It turned out that there had been a delay in providing his exam paper so that he too was not ready. It is thought that one of the boys in question was in fact the author himself. However, like Galton he did no further research into the subject of 'super-twinship' despite his own experience of it.⁷

False Starts

Half a century later, it was still possible for recognized twin expert Nancy Segal of the University of Minnesota to state in an interview that such studies of twin telepathy as there had been were ‘so poorly done that you can’t even use them to make an informed judgment’.⁸ This may have been true of the majority of a very small number of studies, but there were notable exceptions:

In 1961, a team of Toronto-based psychologists set out to design a telepathy experiment under conditions ‘that give the phenomena we study every opportunity to emerge’. They chose twins, being aware that a strong emotional bond made telepathy more likely to occur. They questioned a large group of them and found that about a third believed that they could communicate by telepathy, several being convinced they had already done so, especially when their co-twin had a problem. As one of them put it, ‘I frequently know when there’s something wrong. I just feel on edge and unhappy for no reason’.⁹

Although the Toronto team never managed to carry out their experiment, their advice to future researchers remains useful: twins had to be as identical as possible, even to the extent of thinking of themselves as one person, as some do, and they had to be good at visualizing, since there seemed to be a link between telepathy and imagery.

Four years later, two ophthalmologists from Philadelphia published a brief paper in a leading science journal in which they claimed to have shown that telepathic influences could actually be instrumentally recorded. By artificially inducing alpha rhythm in one of a pair of twins, they showed that the other’s brain went into alpha at exactly the same time through what they controversially called ‘extrasensory induction’.¹⁰

There were weaknesses in this enterprising experiment, which its authors described as ‘preliminary’. There is good reason to think that the strong criticism their paper received was not only out of proportion to its defects, but served to suppress any attempts to pursue this (then) new line of enquiry, as the authors explicitly hoped.

A solitary exception was the similar claim made in 1967 by a team from Rockland State Hospital using a plethysmograph (a now obsolete device which measured blood volume). They used just one pair of twins, but reported confidently that ‘in a physically isolated subject, we have observed physiological reactions at the precise moment at which another person was actively stimulated’. They even printed the entire chart record ‘to show how obvious the [reactions] are’.¹¹

Obvious they may seem, yet the researchers mentioned in both the above experiments found that such reactions were not observed between all twins. Although they had each shown that it was possible to make instrumented recordings of what appeared to be telepathy in action, it was to be some forty years before there was any sustained attempt to follow up their work.

By the end of the twentieth century, research into twin telepathy had not made much progress. Despite the abundance of anecdotal evidence for it, critics preferred alternative explanations. As late as 2011 a professor of psychology could still confidently assert that 'twin telepathy is due to the highly similar ways in which they think and behave, and not extra-sensory perception'.¹² However, recent evidence, some of it published before that year, indicates that this may have been a premature over-simplification.

Difficulties in Research

Much of the early research involved very small numbers of subjects, with no attempt to select them for susceptibility to telepathy. It was also assumed that all identical twins were alike and so should be able to demonstrate telepathy on demand, regardless of the type of test, and the type of twin.

The term 'identical', commonly used for what are more accurately known as monozygotic (MZ) twins is misleading, for there can be considerable differences among them, as Galton had noticed in his survey mentioned above. Some remain closely bonded throughout their lives, while others assert their independence from an early age, in extreme cases even severing relations between themselves. It can be fairly said that some identical twins are more identical than others, some very much more so. How could this be?

MZ twins come into being when a fertilized egg, or zygote, splits into two (or more) zygotes in the womb, each of which evolves as a genetically identical yet individual entity. Studies of a large number of MZ twins at the University of Indiana have shown that the timing of the split has a marked effect on the twins' personalities, the late splitters, who have not been given their own sacs and placentas, showing much stronger bonding with each other. As they have spent up to almost twelve days as a single entity, followed by the entire period of gestation in direct contact with their twin, even to the extent of being literally entangled, we might suppose that they are more likely to display telepathy than early splitters. There are promising indications that this is so,

but it has yet to be fully confirmed experimentally.¹³

Another problem the researcher must face is that telepathy as experienced by twins is typically a spontaneous phenomenon, and therefore difficult to reproduce in a laboratory setting. This is especially so when, as so often occurs, the distant stimulus is a distressing one such as an accident, pain, disease or death. Yet there have been several attempts to do this without putting subjects' lives at risk, with some success. The first was in 1997 when a popular television programme included an experiment in front of a live audience: here twin A, seated in front of a large pyramid, was put into a light trance state, while her sister B was in a distant and soundproof room wired to a polygraph that recorded her respiration, heartbeat, and galvanic skin response.

After a period of relaxing meditation, the pyramid was made to explode with a loud bang, giving twin A a considerable shock. At the same time all channels monitoring B peaked sharply. This was a useful pilot project for more tightly controlled experiments to follow. It showed that when twins are carefully selected, as these were, and submitted to a surprise stimulus, they are far more likely to react than they might succeed in the type of telepathy experiment that involves guessing symbols on cards.¹⁴

Following this programme – along with a popular book and a journal article on twin telepathy – four similar experiments using the polygraph were shown on different channels.¹⁵ This gave some support to the view that telepathy can be shown not only to cause a physical response, but also to be instrumentally recorded as it does so. Surprise stimuli used included plunging a hand or foot into ice-cold water, giving a mild electric shock, and making sudden loud noises by bursting balloons or dropping piles of china plates.¹⁶

New Directions

In 2004, a survey by the Department of Twin Research and Genetic Epidemiology of King's College, London (DTR) elicited more than five thousand replies. Nearly 40% of the twins on its register, asked if they had 'the ability to know what was happening to their partner', replied yes, a further fifteen percent being 'convinced' of it. Even if those who did not reply were all unconvinced, this still meant that about a third of some nine thousand twins were at least open to the possibility of communication at a distance, more than

a thousand having no doubts. This is almost the same percentage that Galton had found a century earlier of 'extremely close resemblance'.

A similar result was achieved by author Mary Rosambeau after a newspaper appeal to which she received six hundred replies. Her lengthy questionnaire on all aspects of twin activity included these two questions: (1) Have you or your twin(s) had any experience which might be explained as being able to read each other's minds? If so, what?, and (2) Have you ever been surprised by both of you having the same illness or pain at the same time?

She received a total of 183 'yes' replies, and found they fell into six categories:

- Anticipation of imminent contact, or 'knowing' when one twin is about to telephone the other. This is suggestive of telepathy but not proof. For example if they always phoned each other daily it would not be strong evidence for it, but if such calls were rare it would be considerably stronger
- Simultaneous identical speech or thought - saying the same thing at the same time, singing a song the other was just thinking of, or as one twin put it, 'We often answer a question that the other has not yet asked'. This is more suggestive of telepathy, but could also be just an instance of thought concordance, as could the following:
- Simultaneous identical writing. This is fairly common, for example when replying to the same exam question after doing the same homework, even in identical words. (But see the experience of Newman's twins described above.)
- Simultaneous expression of identical taste, as by Galton's champagne glass buyers.
- 'Just knowing'. Twins frequently report that they 'just knew' that their other was in trouble. They comment 'I felt something was wrong', 'I felt very uneasy' or 'I was overcome with misery'.
- Sympathetic pain. This is the most suggestive of telepathy, especially when it coincides with a distant accident, which can hardly be ascribed to genetic or any other kind of concordance.¹⁷

A particularly striking example, which was filmed at the time and later shown on television, showed a six-year-old girl with a plainly visible black eye assuring her mother that she had *not* had an accident and felt no pain, while

her sister *had* been involved in a playground tumble that had left her with an even blacker eye (the same one) and considerable pain. There are several similar incidents on record.¹⁸

More detailed subsequent surveys with twins from the DTR gave clear support to earlier findings. While a surprising number of fraternal, or dizygotic (DZ) twins reported instances of both telepathy and shared dreams, MZ twins reported almost twice as many of each.¹⁹ Thus, there is now compelling evidence that *some* MZ and some, though fewer, DZ twins have experienced some form of communication at a distance with their brothers or sisters in a way as yet unexplained.

Future Research

Telepathy is of course not restricted to twins. The other two pairings most likely to experience it are parents and children, especially mothers and newborn babies,²⁰ and dogs and their owners²¹. Yet the twin bond is perhaps the strongest of all, since unlike the other two it can last a (human) lifetime. It is also of special interest because it can produce visible physiological evidence, as mentioned above. It is now possible both to record telepathy instrumentally as it happens, and to observe its after-effects.

There have been detailed studies of purported reincarnations involving twins,²² but despite more than two centuries of well documented evidence and some promising starts, twin telepathy remains generally neglected. Adrian Parker has investigated telepathy between twins in the ganzfeld²³, but there has as yet been no sustained research programme into a subject that could force us to accept new aspects of psychology, biology and physics currently regarded as taboo areas.

Critics often point out that if two identical clocks are fully wound, they will always show the same time and probably 'die' at about the same time. This analogy is used to explain away all instances of twins' simultaneous coincidences.²⁴ But if we were to separate our two clocks and smash one to bits only to find that the other one had suddenly stopped, although still wound, what then? This is in effect what does happen, and can be seen to happen with MZ twins. The challenge of twin research is to find out why this is so and what it implies. It is a challenge that only a handful of researchers have so far been willing to face.

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